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Masterpiece

“Daniel Deronda” (1876) by George Eliot

A Novelist’s Visionary Zionism

by Ruth R. Wisse

CAN A NOVEL improve society? Harriet Beecher Stowe thought so when she wrote “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” in order to expose the evils of slavery in America. So did George Eliot when she published the last of her novels, “Daniel Deronda,” in 1876 to bare the prejudicial treatment of Jews among her Victorian contemporaries. Eliot saw in the Jews a test of whether her nation could realize its full potential without, on the one hand, imperial overreach or, on the other hand, reflexive anti-Semitism. In this, the centenary of the 1917 Balfour Declaration – the letter from the British foreign secretary stating that “His Majesty’s government view with favor the establishment in Palestine a national home for the Jewish people” – it is hard to deny Eliot and this novel a prophetic role.

No great novel is ever reducible to a thesis, and this work demonstrates rather preaches its wisdom. At the heart of fiction there is often a love story between a man and a woman. Mary Anne Evans adopted her masculine pen name to ensure that she would be taken seriously as a novelist of ideas. Yet as George Eliot she did not entirely abandon romance. This novel opens with tantalizing promise in a German casino where wealthy visitors from England intermingle with continental Europeans at the leveling sport of gambling. Across the crowded room, a dazzling young woman, Gwendolen Harleth, is observed winning at roulette by Daniel, our critical hero, who does not know yet that he is a Jew.

These would-be lovers would inspire such opposite feelings in readers that some wanted the novel divided: Who needs Gwendolen Harleth? Others could have done without Daniel and wanted the book called by her name. This odd reception of the novel was not unanticipated by the author, who had good reason to develop the two characters independently. After all, wholesome independence was her theme.

English literature had plenty of vile Jews, from Marlowe's Barabas and Shakespeare's Shylock to Dickens's Fagin and Trollope's Augustus Melmotte. By contrast, Daniel Deronda is an Englishman of uncertain parentage. As he discovers his own national purpose as a Jew, so, too, Eliot believed, the English must come to recognize that strengthening their nation required honoring the same impulse in others. The antithesis of anti-Semitism is not benign assimilation - through intermarriage - but mutual respect.

Dissimilar in character and disposition, Gwendolen and Daniel have to find their way in a stratified society that is undergoing dramatic change. Gwendolen – the novel is also very much a woman's story of new opportunities and corresponding dangers – has had every natural advantage. But when the unstable financial market suddenly plunges her widowed mother into genteel poverty, Gwendolen, who has been trained for nothing but salon society, realizes that she must find either lowly employment or advantageous marriage. She calculates her chances of happiness without realizing that others are more wickedly calculating than she.

Daniel's insecurity runs deeper. Raised by his guardian with every educational and social advantage, the boy does not know where he belongs in the society he is expected to join. A series of accidental encounters, and his search for what we call "identity," introduce him to Jews and to their uncertain status as a people.

Eliot, who had started out with common prejudices about Jews, developed an interest in them and began studying Hebrew and reading Jewish history. Daniel's discovery parallel hers. Even as many European Jews at the time were choosing to shed their Jewishness – several appear in the novel – he gropes his way to an appreciation of his heritage and its challenge: "The idea that I am possessed with is that of restoring a political existence to my people, making them a nation again, giving them a national centre, such as the English have, though they too are scattered over the face of the globe."

Imagine, the visionary of modern Zionism not as a Hungarian-born Jew with a black beard but as an Englishwoman who was the most acclaimed British writer of her time. Twenty-one years before Theodor Herzl would assemble the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897, Eliot's book laid out the moral and political groundwork for the initiative. An outsider, she wrote so intelligently about the Jews that Jewish readers marveled, feeling for her the special gratitude of a maligned minority that suddenly finds itself both understood and championed.

But political sympathies alone, no matter how noble, do not ensure a literary gem, and this is surely one, highlighting what is common in human nature through differentiated cultures and national dispositions. Eliot puts her extraordinary mind and learning at the service of her assorted characters with sympathy, tact and uncommon insight. The 19th century was the great age of the novel, and Eliot's generous soul made it even greater.

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